

458 W 25th St
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8/5/69

Dear Joe,

As I continue excavating the papers on this table, more items come to the surface which supplement my themes. I must admit that my favorite for today is B. B. Piotrovskii, Urartu. The Kingdom of Van and its Art. I had clipped the page from T.L.S. for the verso, a review from 50 years before of Bertrand Russell's Mysticism and Logic, which in spite of several philosophic aversions to Russell, interests me for resemblances between "A Free Man's Worship" and Winterset. I have no idea what if anything Nabokov knows of Urartu, but obviously he knows about ur-art and tu. Since I mentioned reviews of Ada I've seen Updike's in the New Yorker, an essay whose only virtue is its incoherence, since opposite attitudes intersect and then roll back into inconsequence. Pitiful.

Meanwhile on the homefront I am redoing my essay for the Alumni magazine and packing to go to Maryland--a quick visit to my father's house, with an appraiser's glass in my eye, and then settling in Tilghman until Labor Day.

The editor of the alumni magazine not only (at my invitation) suggested changes in my diction, some quite useful, but also in a quotation from Joseph Conrad, a breathtaking touch. His suggestions help me, since they show that he not only does not understand my points, but with only a few deft touches can transform them into something familiar and sloppy.

Beside a remark on the difference between the way Ravel and Geiseking render a composition by Ravel, he has written, "doesn't do anything for me." So I am trying to make myself clear to Mickey Mouse, which makes all my convex go concave.

My best,
Bill

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Some Further Notes

"The Travelers Hear about the Singular Martyrdom of Father Joseph Fitzmaurice, S.J.: A Tale less-Relevant in Appearance than it will Prove in Fact"

John Barth The Sotweed Factor ch.21

When the reader comes upon a digression or an interruption, he must ask of this apparently unrelated part how it is in fact related to the other parts. For instance, a play within a play, a song within a play, a poem quoted in a story, can be expected to elaborate or to amplify themes that might not have emerged explicitly in the action. Consider, of Hamlet's soliloquy in Huckleberry Finn, if any of the ideas mentioned pertain to the themes of the novel. When a song in Twelfth Night interrupts the story, how does it deepen the theme? When is a digression a disruption of the unity of the work, and when is it a way of introducing other ideas.

The digression raises the question of the relationship of parts, and in examining the structure of a work of art, the student must ask what are the parts, and how do those parts combine to form a whole. The relation can be, as Barth suggests above, apparently irrelevant while really relevant. Or it can be irrelevant, incidental, and disconnected. While the overlapping relationships discerned in some art are admired as creating organic wholeness, those relationships also offer an image of reality. And a different theory of reality will permit, and perhaps require, a different relation between parts. For example, naturalism might require continuity and continuous relevance of details to a theme, with a danger of opaqueness, overwhelming meaning with logic and facts. The swift cuts or abrupt transitions of some modern fiction, with no transitions, and sometimes no discernible relation between parts, ~~is~~ are not a failure to achieve organic wholeness, but can be part of a theory which locates reality or value elsewhere. At times the use of symbols, which in naturalistic fiction can work like a digression, can be emphasized until naturalistic transitions become a hindrance, a distraction. The point is that ~~they~~ work is not to be judged according to a criterion of organic wholeness, but is to be judged in terms of expression.